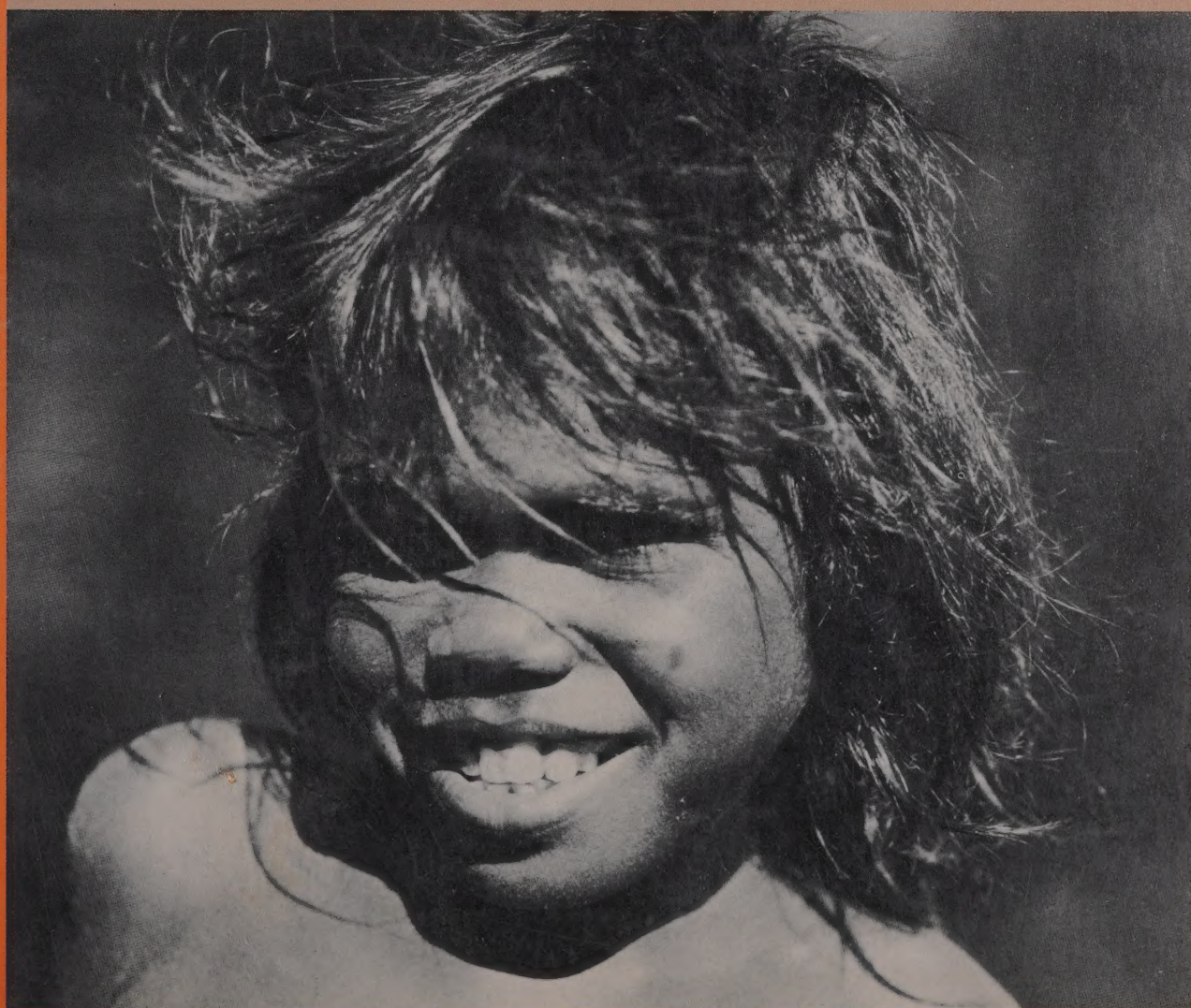


# Children of the Dreamtime

*Traditional Family Life in Aboriginal Australia*

DONALD THOMSON













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VIKING O'NEIL

Viking O'Neil  
Penguin Books Australia Ltd  
Ringwood, Victoria 3134, Australia  
Penguin Books Ltd  
Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England  
Viking Penguin Inc.  
40 West 23rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10010, U.S.A.  
Penguin Books Canada Limited  
2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4  
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd  
182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published by Currey O'Neil Ross Pty Ltd 1983  
as *Children of the Wilderness*  
This new edition published by Penguin Books Australia Ltd 1989

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Produced by Viking O'Neil  
56 Claremont Street, South Yarra, Victoria 3141, Australia  
A division of Penguin Books Australia Ltd

Design by Sandra Nobes  
Jacket design by Jan Schmoeger  
Printed and bound in Hong Kong through Bookbuilders Limited

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication data

Thomson, Donald F. (Donald Fergusson), 1901-1970.  
Children of the dreamtime.

New ed.  
Bibliography.  
ISBN 0 670 90158 X.

(1). Aborigines, Australian - Children - Portraits.  
I. Thomson, Donald F. (Donald Fergusson), 1901-1970. Children of the wilderness. II. Title. III. Title: Children of the wilderness.

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# Contents

List of Photographs	vii
Acknowledgements	xi
Aboriginal Childhood <i>Isobel White</i>	1
Locality Map	6
Children of the Wilderness <i>From the writings of Donald Thomson</i>	7
Cape York	11
Arnhem Land	38
Desert Dwellers	64
Afterword	82
Further Reading	83



[2947 Ko'ondji with spears and spear thrower. Ompela tribe, Stewart River, 1928.]



# List of Photographs

- 2947 Ko'ondji with spears and spear thrower. Ompela tribe, Stewart River, Cape York Peninsula, 1928 vi

## CAPE YORK

- 3301 Nellie and baby, Bambi and Ko'ondji. Stewart River, 1929. 11
- 2926 Nellie with child in basket. Ompela tribe, Eastern Cape York, 1929. 12
- 2967 Nellie and Ko'ondji. Ompela tribe, Stewart River, 1928. 13
- 2970 Nellie and Ko'ondji. Ompela tribe, Stewart River, 1928. 14
- 2962 Nellie and Ko'ondji. Ompela tribe, Stewart River, 1928. 15
- 2936 Tjamindjinyu (Tommy) with crocodile. Ompela tribe, Stewart River. 16
- 2933 Ompela Tribe, Stewart River, 1928. 18
- 2940 Playing at spinning tops. Ompela tribe, Stewart River, 1929. 19
- 2941 Spinning tops, *Hibiscus tiliaceus*. Ompela tribe, Stewart River, 1929. 19
- 2945 Ompela tribe, Stewart River, 1929. 20
- 4132 Wik Monkan children. May 1933. 21
- 4143 Child of Arrdin'ngitt tribe. Western Cape York, 12 May 1933. 22
- 4110 Woman carrying baby in basket, Wik Monkan tribe. 1933. 23
- 4115 Wik Monkan woman and child. May 1933. 24
- 4117 Wik Monkan woman and child. May 1933. 24
- 4128 Wik Monkan children. 1933 25
- 4136 Wik Monkan child. 26
- 4135 Wik Monkan child. 26
- 4107 Wik Monkan baby. March 1933. 27
- 3986 Ceremonial presentation of child to its namesake (*namp kort'n*), Wik Alkan tribe. Cape Keerweer, Western Cape York, 10 June 1933. 28
- 3982 Ceremonial presentation of child to its namesake (*namp kort'n*), Wik Alkan tribe. Cape Keerweer, Western Cape York, 11 June 1933. 28

# CHILDREN OF THE DREAMTIME

2939	On Ebagoola Road. Tjamindjinyu, Ompela tribe, Eastern Cape York, and Ted, Koko Dai-yuri tribe, Western Cape York, 1928.	29
4499	Children of the Koko Dai-yuri tribe, Edward River, Western Cape York, 1928.	31
4152A	N'datan kinni and child, Lin'ngitti tribe. Archer River, Western Cape York, May 1933.	31
4137	Wik Alkan woman and child. 1 June 1933.	32
3305	Old Chako with child, Yintjinnga tribe. Stewart River, 2 November 1928.	33
3475	Yintjinnga tribe. Stewart River, 1929.	34
3499	Communal fishing drive, Yintjinnga tribe. Stewart River, 1929.	35
3965	Ceremonial presentation of child to father, Wik Monkan tribe. Western Cape York, 8 May 1933.	37

## ARNHEM LAND

1288	No information available.	39
1244	Woman and newly born infant, Warramirri group. 25 February 1943.	40
1258	Warramirri baby. 30 August 1935.	41
1263	Children of Milingimbi. 23 September 1935.	42
1264	Wanguri child, Makkarwalla's (Harry's) daughter. Milingimbi, 23 September 1935.	42
1247	Arrawiya baby. Trial Bay, July 1935.	43
1250	Arrawiya children at Wongo's camp. Trial Bay, July 1935.	44
1277	Children of mixed groups, <i>bunggul</i> , following <i>tapi</i> dance. September 1935.	44
1269	Probably Katji lagoon.	45
1227	Girl of Ingura tribe. Groote Eylandt, November 1935.	46
1270	No information available.	47
1025	Food preparation, <i>mundjutj</i> , <i>Buchanania obovata</i> . Caledon Bay, 1943.	48
1267	Warramirri child. Melville Bay area, September 1935.	49
1975A	Raft ( <i>tjutu</i> ).	50
1965	Dugout canoe. Port Bradshaw.	51
1293	Caledon Bay, 1943.	52
1297	1935.	53
832	Fishing, bailing technique. June 1937.	54
749	Kurka gori trap, Liagallauwumirr Matta. Glyde River, April 1937.	55
1276	Balmibi girls. Katji lagoon, 28 December 1936.	56



1527	Wongo's camp. Balpoi, Trial Bay, July 1935.	57
1567	Wurrulluma, daughter of Wongo, with child, Tjapu tribe. September 1936.	57
1543	Garmarli, son of Wongo. Caledon Bay, 1935.	58
1540	Wongo and son Garmarli. Caledon Bay, 1935.	58
99	Karmak Tapiwa ceremony: initiation (circumcision), Wongo and son, Tjapu tribe. 12 August 1936.	60
100	Karmak Tapiwa ceremony: circumcision, Tjapu tribe. 12 August 1936.	61
155	Mandialla ceremony: circumcision, Liagallauwumirr group. Djinang Territory, June 1937.	62
153	Mandialla ceremony: circumcision, Liagallauwumirr group. Djinang Territory, June 1937.	62
176	Mandialla ceremony: circumcision, Liagallauwumirr group. Djinang Territory, June 1937.	63

## DESERT DWELLERS

9/1-8	Tjabanangka and family. Hidden Basin, Western Australia, 1957.	65
15-45	Labbi-Labbi rockhole, Red Cliff Pound, Lake Hazlett, Western Australia, 1957.	66
4a-50	No information.	67
5a-76	1963.	68
6a-22	Grinding quandong nuts. 1963.	69
2-66	1957.	70
1/1-39	1957.	71
1/1-32	No information.	72
4a-22	1963.	73
1/3-22	Labbi-Labbi rockhole, Red Cliff Pound, Lake Hazlett, Western Australia, 1957.	74
1/1-4	Bindibu children. 1957.	75
12b-20	1957.	76
4a-8	1963.	77
13/2-3	1957.	78
5a-54	Pankaberri rockhole, Walter James Range, Western Australia, 1963.	79
4a-35	Family at Norlingo. 1963.	80
	Bill Hosmer with Bindibu boy. 1957. (Uncatalogued.)	81



# *Acknowledgements*

THE PHOTOGRAPHS IN this book were taken between 1928 and 1965 by the late Donald F. Thomson, formerly Professor of Anthropology, University of Melbourne. The annotations and text have been gathered from his writings, both published and unpublished. The photographs record a way of life that has passed forever.

The cameras used for the Cape York and Arnhem Land pictures were a Thornton Pickard half-plate camera and a Graflex. The glass negatives were developed in the field working late into the night. Where permanent camps were established a dark room was built. The glass negatives often had to be carried long distances. On Cape York the negatives were transported for more than two thousand miles on pack horses.

Rolleiflex cameras and a Rolleicord were used for the desert photographs.

I would like to thank the Museum of Victoria, Muriel Elden, Eva Haebech, Kelly Koumalatsos and Judith Wiseman for their generous help, and also my daughters Elaine and Rosemary.

Frank Coffa and Otto Rogge of the Museum of Victoria prepared the photographs and I would like to record my special thanks to them. The map was prepared by Anne Gumley.

D.M.T.





# *Aboriginal Childhood*

EARLY IN THE 1970 academic year, my colleague George Silberbauer and I invited Donald Thomson to speak to our class of second and third year Anthropology honours students, who were then studying the literature about the Cape York Peninsula Aborigines. Other interested students and graduate students were invited to attend. Donald came one April afternoon, arriving very late because he and the taxi driver had lost their way between Melbourne University and Monash University. (Other anthropologists who have managed to navigate in trackless desert terrain have been known to lose their way in the city.) Donald had never looked robust in the ten years I had known him, but I was shocked that afternoon by his frailty. Nevertheless, he had insisted on fulfilling his promise of the previous year to give us a seminar.

He had brought some slides of the old-fashioned lantern-slide variety; we had been warned of this and had arranged for an appropriate projector, which George Silberbauer operated. Each slide recalled for Donald many associations and memories. He gave us priceless information about his research among Cape York Aborigines more than forty years previously. He talked at length about each slide and quite forgot to signal a change, so when he paused in his reminiscences, George tactfully passed on to the next slide. This in turn called forth another flood of vivid memories.

Donald had already written much about the ethnography of the Cape York Peninsula people, but what we gained from his reminiscences was insight into how he had gathered this information. It was a seminar on fieldwork methods and experiences, a valuable lesson for those students who were aspiring anthropologists and might soon have to face similar unfamiliar and difficult situations.

Two weeks later we heard with sorrow of Donald's all too early death. All those who had met him grieved over the passing of a great anthropologist and felt privileged to have been part of his last audience. We had fallen under his spell and he had enhanced our understanding of an anthropologist's vocation. We lamented that we had made no tape-recording of his precious memories, but perhaps if we had done so his talk might have been more hesitant and less spontaneous.

Donald died in May 1970 shortly before his sixty-ninth birthday, after an eventful life as an anthropologist. He had studied Aborigines in Cape York Peninsula, in Arnhem Land and in the Gibson and Great Sandy deserts. During his lifetime he published one book<sup>1</sup> and many articles about the Aborigines he studied. Since his death three collections of his writings have been published in book form;<sup>2</sup> two of these

contain biographical details,<sup>3</sup> so I need to explain only briefly where and when these photographs were taken. He made three expeditions to Cape York Peninsula, in 1928, 1929 and 1932–1933, spending a total of three and a half years of fieldwork among the Aboriginal people of the northern half of the Peninsula from the east to the west coasts. He worked among the people of eastern Arnhem Land in 1935 and 1936–1937; in 1941–1943, as Squadron Leader in the RAAF, he organised Arnhem Land Aborigines into a Special Reconnaissance Unit. In 1957, 1963 and 1965 he led expeditions to the Gibson and Great Sandy deserts. In each of the areas of his fieldwork, he was able to study Aborigines who at that time had had limited contact with outsiders.

This collection of Donald's photographs reveals his superb skill and sensitivity as a photographer. Similarly, his writing reveals his acute power of observation, most evident when he describes the appearance, activities and treatment of children. He himself was a great lover of children – he had six much-loved children of his own – and because of his deep interest he reveals details about the Aboriginal children he met that no casual observer would have noticed. Some of these details arose from the particular conditions of his fieldwork; other details apply all over Australia, and have since been confirmed by later fieldworkers.<sup>4</sup> I myself have carefully observed the interaction between mothers and babies in the larger communities in which desert people now live. I found much the same behaviour patterns that Donald saw among people still living in small groups in the desert. In the report of his 1957 expedition he devotes several pages to the desert children and compares their treatment to that received by Arnhem Land children. He concludes that the desert mothers had a harder life because their husbands took less responsibility for the children than the men of Arnhem Land. For example, the Bindibu fathers seldom carried their children, whereas the Arnhem Land fathers often relieved the mothers of this tiring task.

Donald claims that the desert people 'grow the fattest babies in the world'.<sup>5</sup> Whereas very fat babies in Western society may grow into obese children and adults, there was no chance that this could happen in the traditional hunting and gathering life. It is even a wonder that the slim Aboriginal nursing mothers seen by Thomson and Spencer were able to grow such fat babies. One reason for today's tragically high mortality rate among Aboriginal toddlers is that they are unable to offer adequate resistance to infection because of malnutrition brought about by poor social and economic conditions. In the old hunting–gathering days weaning must have been an equally dangerous period because of the scarcity of suitable foods to supplement breast milk, but at least the babies approached this period with a reserve of fat. Moreover, breast-feeding usually continued to a much later age, providing a nutritional back-stop.

Of the Bindibu children he writes,<sup>6</sup> 'My happiest memories are of the children with whom we soon made friends. The little ones merely gazed at us with wide solemn eyes. The bigger ones watched our activities, sometimes from a vantage point on the rocks. Sometimes they would bring us offerings of flowers or stone implements, or a reptile, rather battered in a mass capture . . . I spent many hours watching these children'.



An example of Donald's talent for observation is that he noticed the details of the way Aboriginal babies and children sleep: 'on the bare ground cuddled in their mother's arms . . . depending on warmth from their bodies rather than from the fires'. About the fat Bindibu baby he writes, 'The baby was never heard to cry, for the mother never left it and it was either at her breast or sleeping in the sand beside her. For days . . . the woman gave her undivided attention to the infant. She would lie beside him, cuddling him in her arms to protect him from the winds which were now hot in the daytime, and also shade him with her own body from the heat of the sun. She fed him whenever he was hungry . . . The bond between mother and child is closer among these people than among Europeans, because children are not weaned until they are four or five years old, unless another child is born in the meantime'.<sup>7</sup> This description conjures up a poignant picture not only of the mother and baby, but also of the man watching them. Far from home in an alien environment, was he perhaps homesick, longing to see again the year-old baby daughter he had left behind in Melbourne?

It is a human universal that a young child will feel jealous and upset when mother has a new baby. The Aboriginal mother does her best to minimise this by letting the older child suck at her other breast while she feeds the baby. Usually a few seconds gives the child the assurance that she has not lost her place in her mother's affection, and she will run away to play with other children, or go off with her father or another adult.

From this firm security the small child is able to move out with confidence into the larger world, a world where all whom she meets are her kin, substitute mothers and fathers, who treat her with care and affection. She will move into the group of children of all ages who play all together, the little ones following the big ones in their pursuits.

Their games are those that all the world's children play: running, jumping, tree-climbing, swimming and imitating adult behaviour. Children who live near rivers or estuaries enjoy paddling canoes. If any activity might be dangerous, the older children care tenderly for the safety of the little ones, either helping and protecting them or sending them home to their families. There is no element of competition; children do not vie with each other in physical skills, but rather help and encourage each other.<sup>8</sup> There is no concept of 'mine'; if a plaything is made by an adult for one child (a pursuit many adults enjoy), that child does not regard it as his to monopolise, but shares it with all. Even if it is fragile and liable to be broken by a toddler, the older child gives it up without protest and shows no anger if it is destroyed.

As Donald noticed,<sup>9</sup> a favourite game is 'mothers and fathers', in which the children build their own shelters and older children take the part of the parents, younger children pretending to be their children. Often one of the babies in the camp will be 'borrowed' and carried by the small 'mother', who may decorate herself with mock breasts. Kinship rules are obeyed in this game, so that the play husband and wife will be in the proper relationship, for these are rules required to be learnt in early life.

Another activity is telling stories – about actual events or children's versions of the myths of the ancestors – and at the same time illustrating them by drawing in the sand. Many kinds of string figures ('cats' cradles') can be performed by the children, particularly the girls and these too can be used to illustrate stories and myths. In some

areas the children have their own ceremonies, taught by each generation of children to the younger ones; they re-enact simple myths in which threatening evil spirits are fought and destroyed by brave children. Boys act the characters, girls join in the singing, just as their fathers and mothers do at the adult ceremonies. Thus they learn and practise simple versions of the intricate dance steps, rhythms and song styles they will have to learn later to qualify as adults.

Aboriginal languages lack words which clearly distinguish work from play, and much time is enthusiastically spent by children in helping or imitating adults in everyday tasks. Boys and girls, but girls rather more than boys, help to mind and amuse their younger brothers and sisters. Frequently one sees a little girl five or six years old, carrying a baby on her back.<sup>10</sup> Girls go with their mothers, grandmothers and aunts on the daily search for food – roots, leaves, fruits, bulbs, small animals, lizards and shellfish – which will provide the staples for the community. Boys practise hunting by aiming at birds, lizards and other small game. Fathers delight in making miniature tools and weapons for their children – small digging sticks for the girls, spears and spear-throwers for the boys – and the children are received with congratulations when they bring back their contributions.

Very early, children learn to recognise the tracks of animals and the footprints of everyone in the community. When a baby first walks everyone is called to come and look at his footprints, so that they will ever after be known. A favourite game, played by children and adults together, is to copy the tracks of various animals by pressing the palm, fist, or fingers into the sand; thus children learn an essential skill.

There is little apparent discipline or punishment, so that children seem to do exactly as they like, but they are in fact well-behaved in those aspects that really matter to the society. For example, at those religious ceremonies that everyone must attend, the children behave faultlessly, though the dancing and singing may go on for hours, sometimes throughout a whole night.

Children learn very early the proper behaviour to their various kinsfolk. Though there is some variation between different areas of Australia, everywhere there are some kin who have to treat each other with the greatest respect, others who must avoid each other entirely, and yet others between whom a joking relationship exists. Donald notes that among the Aborigines of the Cape York Peninsula (and this is the rule throughout most of Australia) a brother and a sister must avoid each other. One of them must turn away if they are about to meet on a path; they may not touch each other and they may not hand each other food directly, though they may give it through an intermediary, or even on the end of a spear. Nowhere does this rule apply to very small children, and in many areas it does not have to be observed until one or other reaches the age of puberty, but on Cape York Peninsula it applies from the age of eight or nine, where the avoidance rule also applies to brothers-in-law.<sup>11</sup> Donald himself recounts<sup>12</sup> how he was able to use this rule that actual or potential brothers-in-law do not take food from each other, when in the embarrassing situation of being offered the contents of a child's mouth as a gesture of esteem.

Naming an Aboriginal child is by no means a matter for the parents alone. Near and distant kin are consulted and the name may derive from a phenomenon connected

with the child's birth or it may be given by an older person. This gift is presented as if it were a valuable object since the name becomes part of the child's personality, not to be treated lightly; for example, it is regarded as somewhat insulting to shout a person's name across the camp in order to summon him, so a kinship, section or subsection term is substituted. The tie between the child and his namesake is ever after a special one. When one of them dies, the name goes out of use, and the other must be called by a different name.

In traditional Aboriginal society, more than in most societies, childhood is a time of freedom and gaiety, but at the same time it is a period of learning and practising to be an adult. When he is about fourteen a boy enters the men's world through the harsh years of discipline and endurance that are involved in initiation. At the same time a girl goes to the husband, much older than herself, to whom she has long been promised. For both sexes the free years of childhood end abruptly.<sup>13</sup>

ISOBEL WHITE

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Donald F. Thomson, *Economic Structure and the Ceremonial Exchange Cycle in Arnhem Land*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1949.

<sup>2</sup>Donald F. Thomson, *Kinship and Behaviour in North Queensland*, ed. H. W. Scheffler, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1972.

Donald F. Thomson, *Bindibu Country*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1975.

Donald F. Thomson, *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land*, compiled and introduced by Nicolas Peterson, Currey O'Neil, Melbourne, 1983.

<sup>3</sup>*Kinship and Behaviour in North Queensland* and *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land* contain biographical details.

<sup>4</sup>The most notable writing on upbringing of children in Aboriginal society is Annette Hamilton's *Nature & Nurture: Aboriginal child-rearing in North-central Arnhem Land*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1981.

<sup>5</sup>*Bindibu Country*, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup>*Bindibu Country*, p. 93.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 95–6.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 97.

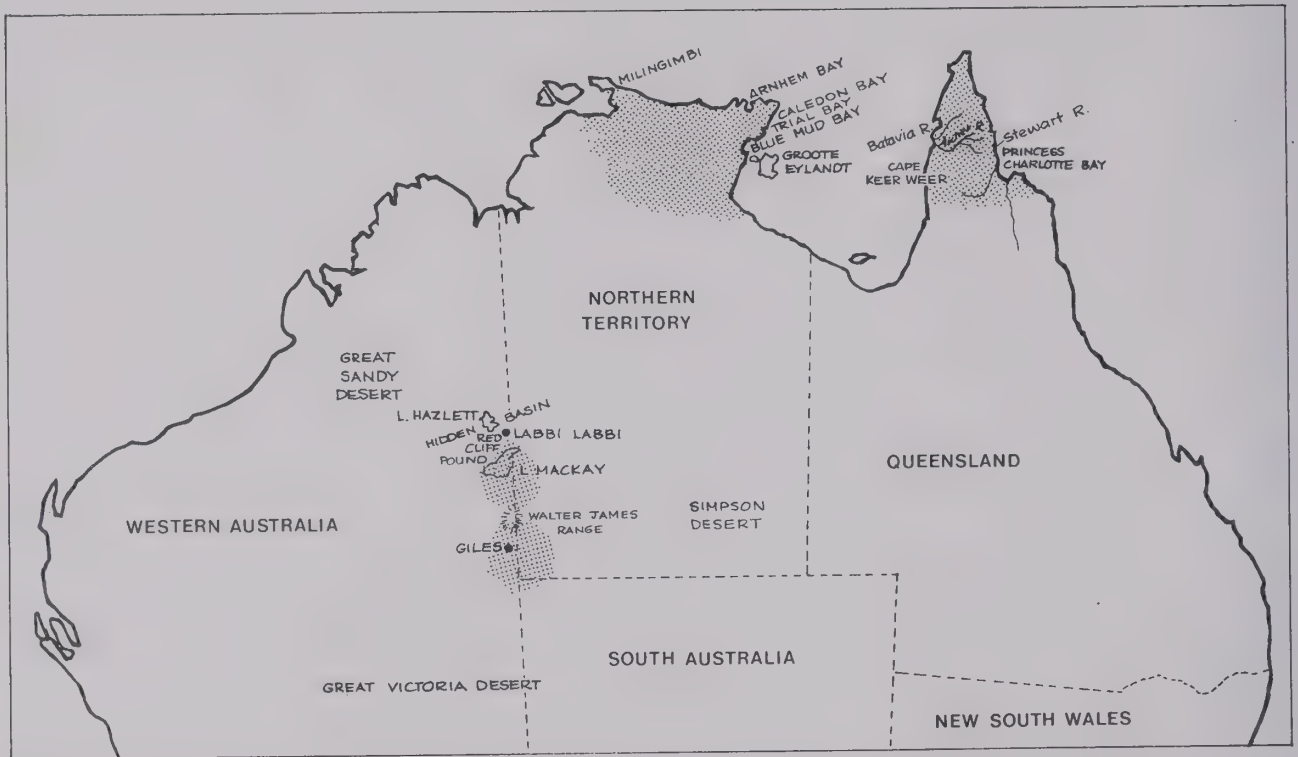
<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>11</sup>*Kinship and Behaviour in North Queensland*, pp. 13, 20.

<sup>12</sup>Donald F. Thomson, 'Childhood and Play among the Australian Aborigines', in the *Age*, Melbourne, 3 September 1955, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*





Photographs included in this book were taken in the areas indicated by the shaded parts of the map.

# Children of the Wilderness

CHILDHOOD AMONG THE Australian Aborigines is the happiest time of their lives. No one who has lived with a group of nomadic hunters, or who has spent any time in a camp of Aborigines who are still living under tribal conditions, can have failed to notice the indulgence and solicitude that is lavished upon the children during their early years. This is, perhaps, some compensation for the years ahead, for the lot of an Aboriginal in Australia is one of incessant hard work and personal discipline, punctuated by rigid tabus that restrict many of his activities.

I remember still my first sight of an Aboriginal camp of the Yintjinnga tribe on the estuary of the Stewart River, Princess Charlotte Bay, in far north Queensland. The Yintjinnga are one of the renowned seagoing peoples of Cape York Peninsula, the people who refer to themselves with pride as the Malnkanidji or 'Sandbeachmen', a word derived from *malnkana*, 'sandbeach', and *-idji*, a suffix, 'belonging to'.

I had just crossed Princess Charlotte Bay in a lugger from the Flinders group of islands. The vessel possessed no engine and we had been becalmed for hours during the night and arrived off the mouth of the Stewart River at sunrise. For me it was a memorable day. The water was oily calm and the clear blue of the sea was intensified by the long white sand beaches over which silver gulls and terns, or 'sea swallows', hovered. Offshore a flock of pelicans was fishing. As we neared the sand-bar off the mouth of the river we could see a dugout canoe with single outrigger moored close inshore by means of a rope of hibiscus fibre attached to a pole and driven deep in the mangrove mud. At the end of the long jutting sandbank two little children, stark naked, were playing intently in the shallow water. In the placid waters of the estuary, just inside the sand-bar, a fisherman waited, multiple-pronged spear poised. Just above high water mark I saw the camp of the Yintjingga on the open seashore.

The dry season, the season of the south-east winds that blow for several months, was well advanced, and the camp consisted of a number of half-moon-shaped houses, domed, but open on one side, built of pliant saplings inserted into the sand and thatched with paper bark. At this season these houses, called *wai'i*, served for protection against the keen winds that swept in from the sea. Within a few hours I had been admitted to the camp and had settled down to live with the Yintjingga. Here, I served my apprenticeship as a field anthropologist. I was young then and with these genial, kindly people I spent one of the happiest periods of my life. The Yintjingga were seafarers, canoemen, who won most of their animal food – fish, turtles and their eggs, the eggs of sea-birds, and most important the dugong or 'sea-cow' – from the open sea.

Soon I had made firm friends with the Malnkanidji. I learned that the surest way to their hearts was by winning the confidence of their children. For me, life at first was a complex business, but soon the people gave me a place in their kinship system. This simplified matters, for in this way I learned the terms I applied to every individual in camp, and especially the behaviour that I was expected to extend to each person and how I could expect him to behave reciprocally to me, and this was to stand me in good stead in at least one awkward situation.

I was walking along the beach when a small elf-like child called Kapudana, his stomach bulging, his mouth crammed with some tasty morsel, put his hand in mine and then turned to be lifted up. I carried him, blackfellow style, astride my shoulders as we went on a tour of the camp. Kapudana addressed me in short snatches of baby talk in his own language, then as I put him down he looked up at me with a sudden surge of affection, emptied the bulge of half-chewed fish from his cheek into his hand and held the offering up to me in full view of the camp. This was a spontaneous mark of affection and esteem. To refuse the gift of a child would have been a fatal rebuff. But suddenly I remembered the kinship pattern which is obligatory between potential brothers-in-law and which was enforced, even at that age.

'*Kintja-ba! Piloba kintja!*' I exclaimed. 'Your brother-in-law [is] tabu!' Mollified, little Kapudana replaced the ball of fish pulp in his cheek and went on chewing. It is forbidden for a man to take any food from his wife's brother, actual or potential. And Kapudana was the brother of Muto'muto, the girl who stood to me in the relationship of potential wife.

A kinship term is distinct from a personal name, and these kinship terms are taught to a child at a very early age. At one camp a Koko Ya-o man picked up a tiny baby that was just crawling about the camp, only a few months old – a child who would not be able to talk for some time – and swinging it backwards and forwards between his outstretched arms he cried: '*Ng'ka pola, ng'ka pola intjin*'. 'Your father's father, your father's father [you] call [me]!' The term of course meant nothing to the infant, but it showed at how early an age the terms are taught to babies; from earliest infancy. I had noted that when Tommy was in the camp of our men and his daughter came up to them, he broke off what he was saying to tell the child, aged about seven, the terms that she applied to those present, so, of course, that she should know how to behave towards them, though the tabu at that age would not be severe.

Although children are taught the terms of relationship that they apply to near kin and are schooled in the appropriate behaviour – generally by the father's elder sister – they are allowed almost complete freedom. The food tabus, which greatly restrict their diet in later life, are relaxed. And in the early years the brother–sister tabu which is stressed in later life does not prohibit the children from playing together. In these early years children of both sexes are treated with the greatest indulgence. They are spoiled and petted, and among people who are still living their tribal lives a child is rarely scolded.

Even prolonged outbursts of temper, in which a child throws itself kicking and screaming on the ground, are rarely corrected. However, rudeness to others, particu-



larly to elders within the kinship structure, is corrected sternly, even in very young children, for this is regarded as anti-social and may humiliate the parents, who, in extreme cases, will make ritual expiation in the form of a ceremonial presentation of food to restore a state of ritual well-being.

In the case of parents, their behaviour, and even the food they are permitted to eat, undergoes a drastic change in the early years of the child's life, and even before it is born. There is little change in the vegetable foods the parents are permitted to eat, but the animal foods are restricted drastically. These food tabus fall upon the father, that is, the husband of the pregnant woman, as well as upon the woman herself. These must be observed or the unborn child will suffer injury, and others will fall under what is known as 'ritual sanctions'. Failure to observe these tabus is punished by 'ritual' or 'supernatural' visitation: by 'bad luck', indicating the displeasure of the spirits of the totemic ancestors who still act as guardians of the way of life which they founded.

The ill-effect of the breaking of these tabus would not be seen at once, but would become manifest in later life. So when a deformity, particularly a boil or an open sore, afflicts a child or even a grown man or woman, it is often attributed to failure to observe tabus, as punishment for a ritual offence committed, perhaps years before. This means that, apart from those tabus which are watched over by the Culture Heroes themselves, 'sympathetic magic' plays an important part in regulating what an Aboriginal may eat.

In eastern Arnhem Land no child may eat a yam or other root that is crooked, and must avoid, especially, yams distorted by growing in stony or gravelly soil. The eating of these is believed to result in deformity, particularly the chronic lesions of yaws (framboesia), an affliction which disfigures many children.

The people of north-eastern Arnhem Land believe that the *malli*, the spirits of unborn babies, swim in the sacred wells, the *kapu mangotiji*, in the clan territory of their fathers, until they enter the bodies of their mothers at conception. Sometimes the *malli yoto*, the baby spirit, comes to the father in a dream and speaks to him. At other times it is brought by a fish or other game. When a woman tells her husband that she is going to have a baby he will recall the capture or spearing of a fish or other quarry, which may have been surrounded by special circumstances. Then he says to himself, 'Ah, that was a *mardai'in koiya* [fish]'. And he knows that it was this fish that brought the spirit of his unborn child when it was seeking its mother. The people in this territory believe that the *malli* returns at death to the same sacred well from which it emerged. It becomes small again and swims about until it is born once more.

An Aboriginal baby is of a light honey colour at birth and lacks the black pigmentation of the adult. The hair is intensely black and the lips form two lines of carmine which present a startling appearance. In a short time the skin darkens in colour. To expedite this process the mother sprays the baby's body with milk from her breasts and rubs its body with charcoal made from certain trees, which have a special significance on account of their place in mythology. This process is said to '*molkuma*', 'to make black'; *mol*, black, *-kuma*, a suffix meaning 'make'.

In most regions of Australia several inches of the umbilical cord are left attached to

the baby's navel until it withers and falls off. The withered cord is then carried by the mother, or by relatives of certain orders, and may be the subject of later ceremonial. It must on no account be burned or harm will befall the child.

The most important unit in the social life of the Aboriginal is the family, the group consisting of a man and his wife or wives, and their children, own or adopted. It would be impossible for a child, when orphaned, to be homeless or destitute. Under the kinship terminology, a child extends the terms that it applies to its actual mother and father to all those who these people call sister and brother, "respectively. They are, therefore, mother and father to it, in a sociological sense, and these terms of relationship are not terms only, but carry very definite obligations, including the obligation to adopt the child if its real parents die. Moreover, the child when orphaned does not go to strangers who do not understand it. Rather, it goes as a matter of course to its own relations to whom, from the very beginning, it has applied the same terms as to its own parents.

A special bond exists between mother's brother and sister's son. The mother's brother is a kind of male mother. He takes the part of his sister's son in fights, shelters him, and makes excuses for him when he errs. Sometimes, in minor matters, he will make expiation to avert punishment for his sister's son. Ill-treatment of children is inconceivable, and children are almost invariably 'spoiled' from birth by their parents, and by all with whom they come in contact. Ill-treatment of any child would at once result in a fight; that an adult should strike a child is almost unthinkable.

In childhood, as he follows his father in the bush, an Aboriginal boy begins to acquire the habit of minute observation. He grows accustomed to examining human footprints closely and to studying them just as he does the tracks of animals, and so recognises them at a glance. Thus from childhood he is accustomed to making accurate observations, and drawing logical, scientific deductions from what he sees. He recognises the footprints of the members of his horde, and he is so familiar with them that he knows, for example, even their normal length of stride. Because he is aware also of the activities and the daily routine of these people and the occupations in which they are likely to be engaged at every season of the year, any departure from normal behaviour, as shown by a study of footprints, will give him a clue as to the probable destination of the people whose tracks he is following. This ability often seems to the white man, who knows nothing of his background, like second sight, but in making deductions from what he sees, the Aboriginal tracker is obviously guided by more than mere visual perception.

Among the Kawadji of Eastern Cape York and the neighbouring people of Princess Charlotte Bay, the foot of a child is believed to resemble that of the father. So much reliance is placed upon the study of the foot and footprints, that, when the paternity of a child is in doubt, they examine the sole of the foot and compare it with that of the father, to decide the question. The idea of the existence of this physical bond between a father and child is of interest in view of the efforts of some anthropologists to show that the Australian Aborigines are ignorant of physiological paternity.



# *Cape York*



The most important unit in the social life of the Aboriginal is the family – the group consisting of a man and his wife or wives, and their children, own or adopted. Each family lives as a separate and, to a large extent, independent unit, within the camp of the horde. It makes its own fire around which its domestic life is centred and at which it prepares its own food. Around the fireside the food is eaten and here the family sleeps and lives its own separate life. [3301 Nellie and baby, Bambi and Ko'ondji. Stewart River, 1929.]



This basket in which the baby is carried is made of palm leaves and is known by the Stewart River people as *olk*. [2926 Nellie with child in basket. Ompela tribe, Eastern Cape York, 1929.]





[2967 Nellie and Ko'ondji. Ompela tribe, Stewart River, 1928.]



A woman and fishing net in the calm, shallow waters of the Stewart River, Princess Charlotte Bay. The broad estuary of the Stewart River is the home of a tribe of great fisherfolk and seafarers, an unusual group of Australian natives who obtain most of their food with long harpoons, fish-spears and nets. [2970 Nellie and Ko'ondji. Ompela tribe. Stewart River, 1928.]





[2962 Nellie and Ko'ondji. Ompela tribe, Stewart River, 1928.]





Father and daughter among the 'Sandbeachmen': 'Ngarra Malnkanidji', 'We, the Sandbeachmen!' as they call themselves with pride. Among the Malnkanidji of Eastern Cape York, childhood is happy and lighthearted. The people are fishermen, canoe-makers and harpooners, and live close to the sea where the children play in the shallows. Small crocodiles, like the one shown in this photograph, are highly prized as food. [2936 Tjamindjinyu (Tommy) with crocodile. Ompela tribe, Stewart River.]



## *Betrothal and marriage ceremonies*

*At a very early age a betrothal ceremony, in which a girl child is promised to her future husband, is carried out in camp in the presence of many witnesses, among whom are the old men whose deliberations are responsible for the legal code of the group.*

*It was the practice in this area (Cape York) for girls to be married very young, sometimes at puberty, or even before this age. The reason for this, advanced by informants, was that the girl would not be afraid of her husband if she grew up with him.*

*When the time for the marriage arrives, a fire is lighted for the couple and the woman's possessions are placed beside it. The man, with his spears and spear thrower and his firestick, moves his camp to this fire. The girl is led up and in the presence of the camp they sit on opposite sides of the fire.*

*As the Aborigines say, 'Tomorrow they look around yam', they are married. This simple marriage ceremony consists in the sharing of a common fire, symbolical of social life, in the presence of witnesses.*



In the early years of her life a girl child follows her mother, and will often be seen gathering fruit and other vegetable food, which she prepares for herself in imitation of her mother. So a child learns, in play, the chief activities of her future life. [2933 Ompela tribe, Stewart River, 1928.]



Model spears, canoes, weapons and implements are often made for children. Boys are given small play spears, the tips neatly padded with paper-bark. Spinning tops are made from a variety of seed capsules and fruits and make-believe babies are made, sometimes of mud, to serve as dolls. Here a little girl is playing with tops made from the seedheads of *Hibiscus tiliaceus*. [2940 Playing at spinning tops. Ompela tribe, Stewart River, 1929.]



[2941 Spinning tops, *Hibiscus tiliaceus*. Ompela tribe, Stewart River, 1929.]



Among the coastal people water vessels are sometimes made from large conch or bailer shells fitted with carrying handles made from strips of bark. The excrescence of this melaleuca provides reliable fresh water for collection in a bailer shell. [2945 Ompela tribe, Stewart River, 1929.]





Water babies: two little girls in a small bark canoe in a lily swamp. Older girls frequently place the blue flowers of water lilies behind their ears to make themselves 'flash', in order to look attractive to their lovers. [4132 Wik Monkan children. May 1933.]





Yam sticks are often made from the heavy, hard, fine-grained, red wood of the ironwood tree or from the tough wood of the mulgas. In north Queensland the hard dense wood of *Acacia rothii* is used. These yam sticks are circular in cross section and about an inch or more in diameter. They are sharpened at one or both ends and the points are hardened in the fire. Fine digging sticks are much prized and become so highly polished after years of use that they acquire an almost glass-like finish. [4143 Child of Arrdin'ngitt tribe. Western Cape York, 12 May 1933.]





While it is quite small a baby is carried by its mother in a large grass basket, a trough of wood or bark, or even in a roll of bark slung across her left shoulder so that her right hand is free to use the yam or digging stick. The baby is placed on the ground nearby under a shelter of bark or leaves to protect it from the sun or rain. [4110 Woman carrying baby in basket, Wik Monkan tribe. 1933.]





This is the usual 'grip' used in picking up all but the smallest babies on Cape York Peninsula.  
 [4115 Wik Monkan woman and child. May 1933.]



[4117 Wik Monkan woman and child. May 1933.]





[4128 Wik Monkan children. 1933.]

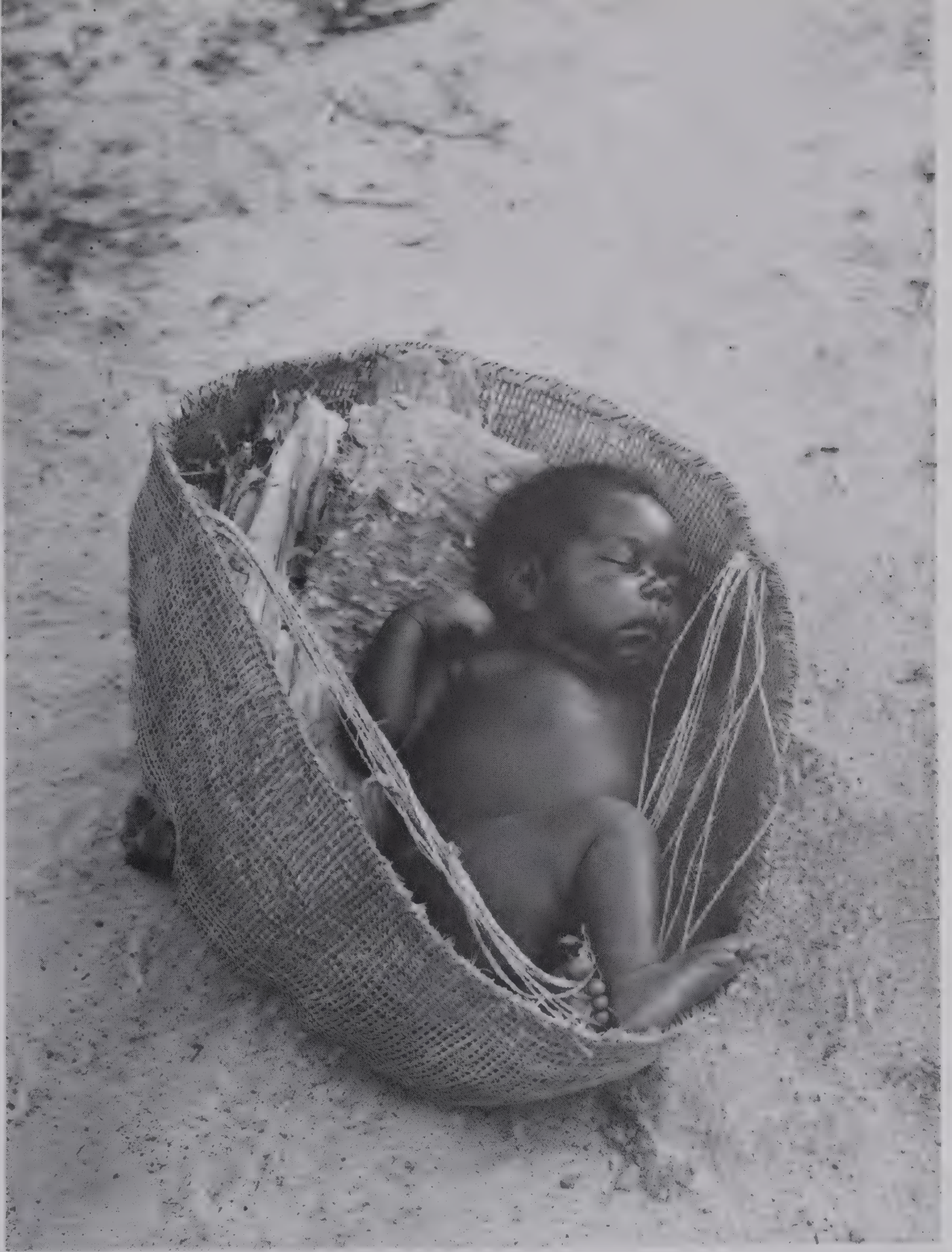


[4136 Wik Monkan child.]

This little girl is playing at *ornya* (ghost).  
The bark bundle is a make-believe 'body'.  
[4135 Wik Monkan child.]







[4107 Wik Monkan baby. March 1933.]



This photograph shows the ceremonial presentation of a child to its namesake (*namp kort'n*), in this case own father's elder brother. The child, a girl, was decorated for the occasion. Her body was painted with red ochre and red paint, and she was adorned with a string of bird down around her waist. She carried a mother-of-pearl breast pendant and a head ornament made from the yellow crest of the white cockatoo. [3986 Ceremonial presentation of child to its namesake (*namp kort'n*), Wik Alkan tribe. Cape Keerweer, Western Cape York, 10 June 1933.]

During the ceremonial presentation of a child to its namesake, the child is placed face down on the prone body of her *namp kort'n*. Henceforth a special bond exists between them. [3982 Ceremonial presentation of child to its namesake (*namp kort'n*), Wik Alkan tribe. Cape Keerweer, Western Cape York, 11 June 1933.]







Even after initiation has begun, a boy may still accompany his own family when they are on the move, and he may go with his father into the bush to learn bushcraft and acquire skill in hunting, fishing, and the tracking of game. [2939 On Ebagoola Road. Tjamindjinyu, Ompela tribe, Eastern Cape York, and Ted, Koko Dai-yuri tribe, Western Cape York, 1928.]

*Each morning as the sun rose the small boys, armed with short play spears, repaired to a clearing outside the camp for about half an hour's spear practice. There was rarely any supervision of this, and the boys entered into the spirit of the thing as earnestly as a mob of urchins plays football on a vacant allotment. They were extremely skilled, and soon learnt to be ready with their spears.*

*On one occasion an enterprising small boy, who evidently became annoyed with a little girl, speared her in the leg. Immediately pandemonium reigned, not so much from the little girl, but among the women. A fight seemed imminent between two Amazons, who settle their neighbourly differences with their yam sticks when heated obscenities fail. But, thinking discretion the better part of valour, the boy tactfully fled into the bush and peace was restored.*





[4499 Children of Koko Dai-yuri tribe. Edward River, Western Cape York, 1928.]

One the chief games of the women and children is 'cat's cradle'. Elaborate figures resembling animals and natural objects are made by skilful manipulation of a length of string. [4152A N'datan kinni and child, Lin'ngitti tribe. Archer River, Western Cape York, May 1933.]







In colour, the Australian Aboriginal is dark brown or brownish black, lacking always the intense black of the African Negro. The skin is smooth and soft, and when these people are in good health and living on their own natural foods, especially when wild honey, or 'sugar bag', is plentiful, their skins, particularly in the case of women, often glisten with a fine satiny sheen. [4137 Wik Alkan woman and child. 1 June 1933.]



Old man Chako with his *pipi*, little Omi. [3305 Old Chako with child, Yintjinnga tribe. Stewart River, 2 November 1928.]





The lower reaches of the Stewart River where the bed of the river is several hundred yards wide; a stretch of clean sand for most of the year, swelling to a great river in the rainy season. [3475 Yintjinnga tribe. Stewart River, 1929.]





Fishing enterprises are most often carried out by the men, but women often co-operate in the organised drives in which big hand-nets are used. The lagoons yield a varied catch of fish, particularly cat fish, eels, tortoises and freshwater snakes. [3499 Communal fishing drive, Yintjinnga tribe. Stewart River, 1929.]

## *Ceremonial presentation of a child to its father*

Following the birth of a child among the Wik Monkan tribe of Cape York, the mother remains in isolation for a period of two to four weeks. During the whole of this time neither the father nor any man may see the mother or baby. During her seclusion the mother is attended only by her female relatives. Then the ceremonial presentation of the child to its father takes place. The child is known as 'tabu child' until after the ceremony.

At a ceremony I attended in 1933, the relatives squatted on the ground, the father a little in front. Meanwhile the mother and baby were painted in preparation for the ceremony, the mother with white clay, the body of the baby smeared first with red ochre and then painted white. Its breast was marked with longitudinal streaks of white, and it was adorned with a mother-of-pearl pendant and a necklace of mother-of-pearl placed on its forehead and another on its neck with native companion feathers inserted under the latter.

With the baby in her arms the mother left the shelter and advanced towards the waiting relatives. An old woman walking behind carried a goose-wing fan for the purpose of driving off the flies that might follow from the tabu place. This is said to symbolise the severing of the association of the mother and child with the tabu place. A quantity of vegetable food may also be carried by the new mother.

The mother slowly approached the group seated on the ground. This was the first glimpse the father had had of his infant, but he sat with downcast eyes. When the mother reached the group she approached her husband and walked twice around him in the same direction; after which she walked towards his eldest sister, and completely encircled her as she sat on the ground, the old woman still following closely behind with the fan to drive off the flies. After this the mother walked to the father, and seating herself before him, presented the baby to him. The food is usually presented to him at the same time. He takes the food and looks at it, but he may not eat it; this is the privilege of his father and of the mother's father.

When he received the child in his arms the father passed his hand under his axilla and rubbed the sweat, or 'smell' as the natives say, on the head of the child. Then the mother in turn rubbed her own axillary sweat on the shoulders of her husband. The object of this rite was to avert the bad luck in hunting that might otherwise ensue. In addition the father rubbed his axillary sweat on the knee and elbow joints of the child; then taking each in succession between his teeth, he bit them gently in order that the child might grow strong.





Ceremonial presentation of child to its father among the Wik Monkan. The group of relatives includes the father, father's younger brother, father's elder brother, father's elder sisters, father's younger sister and mother's mother of the child. The mother with child in her arms is shown encircling the father.

[3965 Ceremonial presentation of child to father, Wik Monkan tribe. Western Cape York, 8 May 1933.]



# Arnhem Land

IN 1934, AFTER three Europeans and five Japanese were killed by Aborigines of the Caledon Bay area of Arnhem Land and the Administration urged the Government to send a punitive expedition, Donald Thomson volunteered to go to Arnhem Land to investigate the causes of unrest. He arrived there in 1935 and spent nearly two years<sup>1</sup> among these warlike people whose almost only contact with white men at that time had been one of armed confrontation and occasional police patrols. (Thomson again returned to Arnhem Land during the Second World War when he organised and commanded an Aboriginal Unit.)

*I lived in their camps and won the confidence of the people. In the months that followed I extended this work of making friends across eastern Arnhem Land traversing on foot a distance of some 500 miles {1935}. They allowed me to share their hunting activities, learn their languages, play with their children, and attend their tribal ceremonies. When we were travelling I slept on the ground, sharing their fires. And when, at last, old Wongo's children came to ride on my shoulders, I knew that I was their friend.*



The Arnhem Land smile: a little girl and her mother from northern Australia where childhood among the people of Arnhem Land is a particularly happy time. {1288 No information available.}



In most regions of Australia several inches of the umbilical cord are left attached to the baby's navel until it withers and falls off. The withered cord is then carried by the mother, or by other relatives of certain orders, and may be the subject of later ceremony. It must on no account be burned or harm will befall the child. [1244 Woman and newly born infant, Warramirri group. 25 February 1943.]





The equivalent of the covered pram or cradle: a baby asleep under a mat called *ngunmarra*, used as a shelter while the mother searches for food. [1258 Warramirri baby. 30 August 1935.]





Little 'mothers', each with a mud baby and clay breasts hung from the neck, at play after the arrival of a new baby in camp. [1263 Children at Milingimbi. 23 September 1935.]

Mud was used to mould 'dolls' which were used by children, together with moulded breasts. Each breast is moulded around a central supporting stick to which a piece of twine is secured so that the breasts can be suspended around the neck of a child to hang down each side of her chest. [1264 Wanguri child, Makkarwalla's (Harry's) daughter. Milingimbi, 23 September 1935.]





Petted and spoiled, this little boy will not be weaned until he is in his sixth year and able to digest the same food as an adult. [1247 Arrawiya baby. Trial Bay, July 1935.]





A group from Wongo's camp at Trial Bay, situated on the Gulf of Carpentaria, building 'houses' of cuttlefish bone. [1250 Arrawiya children at Wongo's camp. Trial Bay, July 1935.]

Aborigines love to dance! Little groups of dancers are seen and heard with monotonous regularity. Note the 'song' man in the foreground. They are imitating the songs heard every night. Children also take part, and even babies scarcely able to walk stand up with their mothers and try to imitate their rhythmic movements with swaying bodies and shuffling feet, or sometimes mark time to the rhythm of the dance with barely perceptible movements of their knees. [1277 Children of mixed groups, *bunggul*, following *tapi* dance. September 1935.]





In the early years the brother—sister tabu which is stressed in later life does not prohibit the children from playing together. [1269 Probably Katji lagoon.]





[1227 Girl of Ingura tribe. Groote Eylandt, November 1935.]





There is no single women's camp and a girl continues to live with her parents as she has done from childhood, and shares in her mother's activities – food gathering, food preparation and the collection and preparation of materials such as grasses and fibres for the making of baskets, nets and other domestic utensils – until she marries and goes to live with her husband. [1270 No information available.]

A Caledon Bay woman with a harvest of *mundjutj*. In late December and January the season is known as *barramirri*, which means 'with north-west wind' and marks the breaking of the wet. The season is also called *mundjutjmirri*, from the fruit *mundjutj*, which has a brief season and is eaten in large quantities. [1025 Food preparation, *mundjutj*, *Buchanania obovata*. Caledon Bay, 1943.]





In Arnhem Land small children often wear armlets of lorikeet feathers and finely spun possum fur which is highly valued, particularly for ceremonial objects. In its non-sacred form the fur string may be used without restriction. [1267 Warramirri child. Melville Bay area, September 1935.]





The raft known as *tjutu* is not capable of carrying big loads, its chief use being for the transportation of children and food. In tidal rivers of Arnhem Land, where the tides are flowing strongly, these light rafts make much leeway and the people often wait for the lull that occurs at the turn of the tide, either at low water or on the full tide, to enable a good landfall to be made on the opposite bank or shore.

[1975A Raft (*tjutu*).]





The seagoing wooden dugout canoe, known as *lippa lippa*, is the craft most extensively used in Arnhem Land. This type of canoe was brought to the area by visiting seafarers from Indonesia. When the big canoes were drawn up on the beach the children would play all day, upsetting them, overloading them and playing about in them for hours. [1965 Dugout canoe. Port Bradshaw.]



If there is a young child the burden of carrying it is shared by both parents. Very young babies are carried by mothers in baskets or troughs. These are slung over the left shoulder and supported by the arm, leaving the right arm free to use the digging stick. Frequently an older child is carried by the father astride his neck or shoulders and from time to time the parents change over and relieve one another. Still older children follow behind, or run alongside, sharing the hunting activities of their parents and imitating them in the search for food, learning in this way the techniques of survival. [1293 Caledon Bay, 1943.]





'*A a bh - djamakuli!*', used by the women of Arnhem Land as an excuse for their children's misdemeanours, means 'they're only children!' and is sometimes an excuse for something diabolical. [1297 1935.]





Extensive fishing operations, in which traps, weirs and fences are used, are characteristic of the latter part of the wet season. In adaptation to special local conditions, some very ingenious fish traps and fishing techniques have been developed. [832 Fishing, bailing technique. June 1937.]





[749 Kurka gorl trap, Liagallauwumirr Matta. Glyde River, April 1937.]



Children teach themselves to swim; as a rule they are not taught. [1276 Balmbi girls, Katji lagoon, 28 December 1936.]





Wongo of Caledon Bay with some of his family. Wongo had twenty-two wives and innumerable children. The explanation of this was that the Tjapu clan was numerically much below normal strength and thus Wongo acquired many women who would normally have belonged to classificatory brothers and other relations. In this way he built up a family solidarity unapproached in Arnhem Land. [1527 Wongo's camp. Balpoi, Trial Bay, July 1935.]



[1567 Wurrigulluma, daughter of Wongo, with child. Tjapu tribe. September 1936.]



[1543 Garmarli, son of Wongo. Caledon Bay, 1935.]

Wongo of Caledon Bay with his son Garmali. For many years Wongo had tremendous influence, not only on this coast, but for a considerable distance over the neighbouring territories, partly by reason of his own remarkable character and partly by the prowess at arms of his warrior sons. [1540 Wongo and son Garmarli. Caledon Bay, 1935.]





## *The initiation code*

*A study of initiation ceremonies in Arnhem Land showed that in most groups the following code was taught to the young men at initiation:*

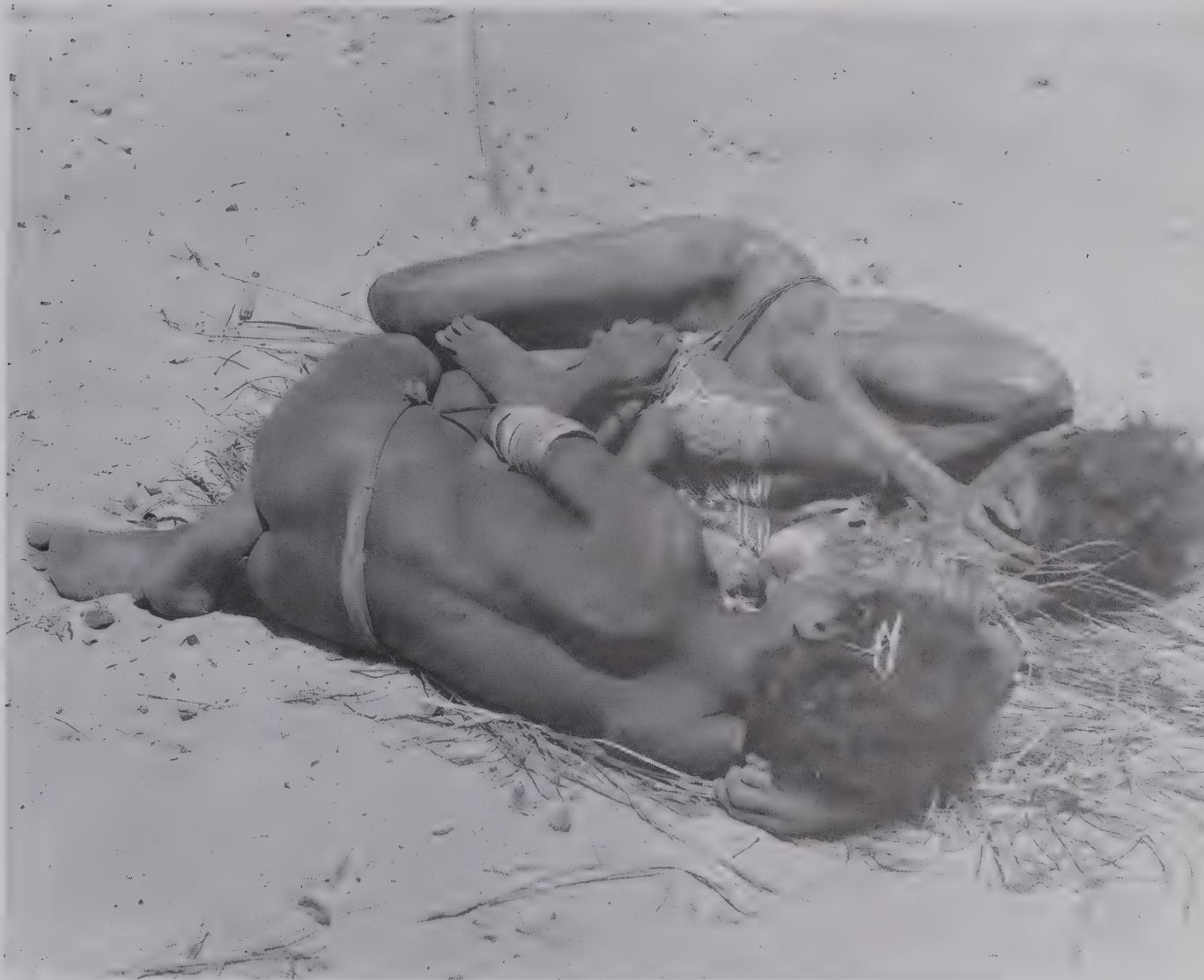
- 1. Do not be greedy. Eat a little and give to others, especially to old people, to women, to sick people and to strangers 'coming by'. If someone brings food near you, do not say: 'Give me, I'm hungry'. Just sit there. (To do otherwise is ta dikku or 'raw mouth', meaning uncouth.)*
- 2. Do not steal other people's food.*
- 3. Do not steal other people's belongings.*
- 4. Do not tell lies; speak the truth.*
- 5. Do not talk back to old people.*
- 6. Do not swear.*
- 7. Do not grumble. (This was not included in all groups.)*
- 8. Do not laugh at strangers.*
- 9. Do not laugh at women.*
- 10. Do not stare at women.*
- 11. Do not 'ask' a woman if you happen to meet when hunting.*
- 12. Have a 'strong heart', ngoi dal.*

*This is what the first old men told us. In some areas it is the old women, not the old men, who administer this part of the ceremony.*



At about the age of eight or nine, a boy is taken away from his parents and placed in the charge of male relatives, generally distant or 'classificatory' rather than actual kin, who are responsible for his initiation. [99 Karmak Tapiwa ceremony: initiation (circumcision), Wongo and son, Tjapu tribe. 12 August 1936.]





Sometimes initiation commences with circumcision, but this rite is not practised everywhere in Australia, for instance not in Cape York. The real effect of initiation is to teach the young man the ideas of discipline, to introduce him to the mysteries and obligations of the sacred aspects of the life of his people, and to develop a sense of duty and obligation as a member of the community. [100 Karmak Tapiwa ceremony: circumcision, Tjapu tribe. 12 August 1936.]



[155 Mandialla ceremony: circumcision, Liagallauwumirr group. Djinang Territory, June 1937.]

A boy is removed at initiation from his mother, often with some show of brutality, followed by ritual protest by his mother and the other women. This gives expression to the fact that childhood is over.

[153 Mandialla ceremony: circumcision, Liagallauwumirr group. Djinang Territory, June 1937.]







With the commencement of initiation, the boy goes to the single men's camp and does not return again to his parents. Initiation is not completed at a single ceremony; it may extend over a period of years, and even continue after the boy has reached manhood. [176 Mandialla ceremony: circumcision, Liagallauwumirr group. Djinang Territory, June 1937.]

# Desert Dwellers

## *The Bindibu*

*It had always been my ambition to live and to hunt with a desert-dwelling people, to study their organisation and their food-gathering habits, and to understand their adaptation to the arid and inhospitable environment and the way in which this influenced their nomadic movements. I wished to learn the extent to which these economical factors were reflected in the social organisation and the ceremonial life and totemism of the Aborigines. However, disorganisation of the tribal life of the Aborigines had proceeded so rapidly that after the Second World War I had abandoned hope of achieving this cherished ambition.*

*With the exception of brief references to the existence of the Aborigines of this arid desert area that occur in the accounts of Warburton and Carnegie, nothing had been recorded of these people or their lives, and the country lying around salt Lake Mackay, and westward towards the Great Sandy Desert, remained virtually unexplored.*

*In 1955 and 1956, reports filtered through of the existence of nomadic Aborigines in the remote, arid region between Lake Mackay and the Great Sandy Desert. At first I was sceptical, but the rumours recurred with increasing frequency and in 1957 I set out with two companions to find the desert Bindibu . . .*

*We experienced no trouble in making friends and the only difficulty in studying their way of life and in getting to know them was due to our inability to make ourselves understood. There were forty-two people, most of them women and children camped near Labbi-Labbi rockhole, and my happiest memories are of the children with whom we made friends.*

*While we were there a small party arrived from the Canning Desert. Among them was a woman carrying a small baby about three months old. And though they had certainly never seen a white man before, the mother, naked, young, but showing the stress of the harsh country that was her home, handed the baby to me without the least hesitation when I held out my arms.*

*Again, in 1963 I returned to the desert and lived with nomadic Aborigines still living the lives of their ancestors in what must be one of the world's most inhospitable regions. Here, where the temperatures range from intense heat to bitter cold, where choking winds sweep across the desert floor, live the Bindibu, who laugh loudly and grow the fattest babies in the world. They are at home, knowing the desert's dangers, its every mood and resource, confident in their activities and completely in command of the environment.*





A desert family at Hidden Basin. The camp site is carefully chosen to be on 'safe' ground. A complementary breakwind is also used to which the family moves out in the morning, where, sheltered from the wind, they 'thaw' out in the sun. [9/1-8 Tjabanangka and family. Hidden Basin, Western Australia, 1957.]





Women line up at Labbi-Labbi rockhole to drink after a hard day's hunt for food. They have no drinking utensils. Etiquette demands that men and women drink separately. The sharpened edges of their digging sticks point upwards to avoid damage on the rocks. [15-45 Labbi-Labbi rockhole, Red Cliff Pound, Lake Hazlett, Western Australia, 1957.]





The Bindibus relish sand goannas and *linga*, a fat rather gross lizard of burrowing habit. They find the lizard by probing the ground above it until it resembles a pin cushion. They then dig with a wooden scoop in the left hand and a yamstick or spear-thrower in the right. [4a-50 No information.]





An old man watched by his boy child digs for witchetty grubs, which are two and a half to three inches long and creamy white in colour. Greatly relished by the desert people, they are eaten raw or lightly roasted and have a slightly oily, nutty flavour. [5a-76 1963.]





The little girl follows her mother when she goes into the bush in quest of vegetable food, collecting roots and tubers in her own little dilly bag and, childlike, bringing each find to show her mother. She mimics her mother's every action, and pretends to prepare her own food. [6a-22 Grinding quandong nuts. 1963.]





Rarely more than one child under three years of age will be seen at one fireside, for on account of the severity of the environment the women are unable to rear a large number of babies. It must be remembered that the woman is the gatherer of vegetable food, which forms an important part of the diet of Aborigines, and that if she has many young children dependent upon her she is greatly hampered at her work, upon which the family depends for its very existence. [2-66 1957.]





Budgerigars for dinner! Great flocks come in to the desert rockholes to drink at evening and are killed by throwing sticks. The birds are gathered in armfuls by the hunters and the little boys watch a flock keenly as it circles low within range and rush to pick up dead or wounded birds. [1/1-39 1957.]



These little girls of the desert, oblivious of the camera, study the strange white man. Their play is based on imitation of the life activities of the adults. [1/1-32 No information.]





[4a-22 1963.]



The rockhole at Labbi-Labbi was deep and crystal-clear. Unlike the Aborigines of the tropical north where the movements of people were dictated by the food supply, the desert people's life was centred on the known waters, the existence and behaviour of which, under all conditions, was a matter of traditional knowledge. [1/3–22 Labbi-Labbi rockhole, Red Cliff Pound. Lake Hazlett, Western Australia, 1957.]





Even before they were weaned, the play activities of the boy and girl children showed differences. The older girls dominated the groups of children and tended to 'mother' not only members of their own family circles but also any younger children. Little girls of six or seven would carry children of two on their hips or backs over the rocks to and from the places where they were playing, although they could barely stagger under the burden. [1/1-4 Bindibu children, 1957.]



{12b-20 1957.}





The Aborigines possess a remarkable knowledge of natural history. They understand so well the habits of the large monitor lizards known popularly as 'goannas', of which there are a number of species each having its own habitat, as well as the non-venomous pythons and their allies the rock snakes, that they know where to find them at any season. [4a-8 1963.]



Lizards known as *linga* are the most dependable source of food supply for the Bindibu. [13/2-3 1957.]





*Ngaba pala!* Beautiful water! [5a-54 Pankaberri rockhole, Walter James Range, Western Australia, 1963.]





Father, mother and child, unafraid and friendly. These desert Aborigines have fine physiques in spite of the harsh environment. [4a-35 Family at Norlingo, 1963.]





The Bindibu children showed no fear of us at all. They would come and stand or squat at our fireside and watch everything we did with frank curiosity. The wireless transmitter, mounted on the jeep, intrigued them greatly. [*Uncatalogued* Bill Hosmer with Bindibu boy, 1957.]

# *Afterword*

IN FEBRUARY 1965 Donald Thomson again returned to the desert, travelling from Giles through the Musgrave, Peterman and Rawlinson ranges to Sahara Wells; then to Marble Bar, down to the Warburtons and back to Giles, but no nomadic Aborigines were sighted. Alas, by that time the Lake Mackay Aboriginal Reserve had been established and it had become government policy to gather the desert-dwellers into missions, thereby changing an inhabited landscape into a desolate no man's land.



# *Further Reading*

- THOMSON, DONALD F. 'Fatherhood in the Wik Monkan Tribe'. *American Anthropology*, vol. 38, no. 3, July–September 1936.
- 'Names and Naming in the Wik Monkan Tribe', *Journal R.A.I.*, vol. 76, 1946.
- *Economic Structure and the Ceremonial Exchange Cycle in Arnhem Land*. Macmillan, Melbourne, 1949.
- *Bindibu Country*. Nelson, Melbourne, 1975.
- *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land*. Compiled and introduced by Nicholas Peterson. Currey O'Neil, Melbourne, 1983.

DONALD THOMSON (1901–1970) was born in Melbourne and studied natural science at the University of Melbourne. While there he developed a proficiency in photography, particularly of scientific and natural history subjects. After graduating in 1925 he took a one-year diploma course in Anthropology at Sydney University, and then accepted a cadetship at the Melbourne *Herald*.

In 1928 Thomson obtained a grant of £600 to work among the peoples of Cape York. He made three expeditions to this area, in 1928, 1929 and 1932–33. He worked among the people of eastern Arnhem Land in 1935 and 1936–37, and between 1941 and 1943, as Squadron Leader in the RAAF, he organised Arnhem Land Aborigines into a Special Reconnaissance Unit. In 1957, 1963 and 1965 he led expeditions to the Gibson and Great Sandy deserts.

He received an OBE in 1945 for his military service in New Guinea and in 1950 he received a doctorate in anthropology from the University of Cambridge. In 1932 he had joined the University of Melbourne as a research fellow attached to the Department of Anatomy and in 1968 he retired as Professor of Anthropology.

Thomson was involved in the setting up of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and served on its council. He wrote numerous articles and several books. His notes, photographs and collection of material objects made in Arnhem Land, Cape York and the desert, form the single most important ethnographic collection made in Australia.

ISOBEL WHITE lectured in anthropology at Monash University in the 1960s and 1970s. Since her retirement in 1977 she has continued her research and writing as an honorary visiting fellow at the Australian National University. Her field research has been mostly among South Australian Aborigines, with special emphasis on women's social and ceremonial life. She is joint editor of *Before the Invasion* (1980) and of *Fighters and Singers: portraits of Aboriginal Women* (1983). She has edited and annotated the manuscript on the Aborigines of Western Australia written by Daisy Bates in the early 1900s. This will be published by the National Library of Australia.

FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPH: 'The Arnhem Land Smile'











*Children of the Dreamtime* is an enchanting book about childish pleasure. These stunning pictures are all the more poignant as they are from a time past, for ever lost by the fragmentation of Aboriginal life. During the 1920s and the following decades, the famous anthropologist Donald Thomson took photographs on his arduous journeys through the tribal lands of northern and central Australia. His thousands of photographs are housed in the Thomson Collection at the Museum of Victoria.

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ISBN 0-670-90158-X



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